DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 149 361 CS 203 874

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TITLE Teaching Poetry: Patterns of Sound and Silence.
PUB DATE Nov 77
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (67th, New York City, November 24-26, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *English Instruction; Higher Education; Imagery; *Language Rhythm; *Literary Analysis; *Literary Conventions; Literary Mood; *Literature Appreciation; *Poetry; Versification

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the patterns of sound and silence in several poems to show that teaching poetry is helping students to discover how poetry works instead of discussing what individual poems "mean." When teachers urge students to examine the forms and structures within a poem, they enable students to participate with that poem, combining personal experiences with the poem's experience, thereby creating the possiblity that a poem can "mean" something to its readers. (RL)

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TEACHING POETRY: PATTERNS OF SOUND AND SILENCE

Norma S. Bowkett

My remarks are based on the following three assumptions:

--One, as Northrop Frye suggests in The Educated Imagination, "if literature is to be properly taught, we have to start at its center, which is poetry, then work outward to literary prose, then outward...to the applied languages of...professions and ordinary life....(for) poetry is not irregular lines in a book, but something very close to dance and song, something to walk down street keeping time to."[1] I have only to study oral literature created before a group of people devised a written language, or listen to chants and dancing games of children, to recognize that poetry is at the center of literature, because poetry requires direct, specific, concrete, associative language and teaches a sense of physical movement and sound.

--Two, every well-written work is an imitation of an earlier work and can thus be studied as growing out of a tradition. This is implied in Ezra Pound's statement that poetry is a dialogue between poets across the years. Paul Fussell, Jr., revives this theory in his discussion of "Writing as Imitation," in which he records examples of even subtle imitations such as Yeats' "syntax and pattern of vowell sounds" in the line from "Sailing to Byzantium" where the speaker asks sages to come

[1]Northrop Frye, The Educated Imagination (Bloomington & London, 1969), p. 121.

And be the singing-masters of my soul.

The imitation here, he shows us, is of Keats' last line in his sonnet "To Sleep":

And seal the hushed casket of my soul.

All of which is to say that "the major condition of being a writer is being a reader."[2] This is not to say that tradition is a handing down of dead fixities, but (that it is) an invitation to further development." [3]

--Three, no matter how well-written a work may be, it still must depend on the willing participation of its reader for its success. In this respect, poetry and music and dance are like drama. The success of the work at any time relies on a lively sense of improvisation between the artist and the audience. John Ciardi calls this process a self-delighting play impulse, describing it in his adaptation of Anatole Frances's "The Juggler of Notre Dame": The juggler, aged and ill, took refuge in a monastery dedicated to the Virgin. When he recovered, he decided to stay. Each of the monks performed a task in honor of the Virgin. One illuminated manuscripts; another grew flowers. Only the juggler produced nothing he could set before her. Finally, in despair, he offered the one thing he could do well. He stole into the chapel when no one was about and began juggling for the Virgin. But a passing monk happened to look

[2]Paul Fussell, Jr., "Writing as Imitation," The Rarer Action (New Brunswick, 1970), pp. 218-239.

[3]Elizabeth Sewell, The Orphic Voice (New Haven, 1960), p. 22. Subsequent page references to the work are enclosed, in parentheses following quotations and passages otherwise cited.

in the window and summoned other monks to witness the profanation. Just as the outraged monks were about to rush in and put an end to the sacrilege the Virgin, smiling, stepped down from "her pedestal and wiped the sweat from the juggler's brow. The offering was acceptable.[4]

If we accept these three assumptions--that poetry is at the center of literature, that each well-written work is an imitation of an earlier work, and that a poem relies on the willing participation of its reader--we are forced to view the art of teaching poetry as a highly creative, demanding activity in which teachers and students assist one another in getting beyond the obvious question of "What does a poem mean?" Not that this question is not helpful, but the "chief use of the 'meaning' of a poem, in the ordinary sense," said T.S. Eliot, "may be to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him..." Helping students discover <u>how</u> a poem works is the exciting part of teaching, for it leads students to discover the essential nature of poetry:

--that poetry is (as music is) a pattern of noise and silence, with links between the noises and silences;

--that a successful poem is a marriage of sound and sense;

--that whenever a poet changes his attitude or tone he will also change technical elements which go to make up that poem.

"To understand this is to understand the theory of poetic form. To be able to respond to this in a poem is to understand the practice of poetry." (Ciardi and Williams, 995)

[4]John Ciardi and Miller Williams, <u>How Does a Poem Mean?</u> (Boston, 1975), pp. 12-13. Subsequent page references to the work are enclosed, with the authors' names, in parentheses following quotations and passages otherwise cited.

The second and third points--that a good poem is a marriage of sound and sense, and that a skilled poet changes technical elements in a poem when he shifts his tone or his attitute--reinforce the basic definition and provide obvious ways into a poem. The following poem by Ezra Pound can point up what I mean.

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Students need only repeat this poem aloud a few times before they discover that the sound reinforces the mental image of a train coming to a stop and sharpens the poet's presentation of the faces as petals of exquisite but brief beauty.

If necessary, to prove our point, we have Pound's record of how he came to write the poem:

> I got out of the metro train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion... Since the beginning of bad writing, writers have used images as ornaments. The image is itself the speech... I wrote a thirty-line poem and destroyed it because it was what we call work "of second intensity." Six months later I made a poem half that length; a year later I made the hokku-like sentence....[5]

Randall Jarrell's short poem, "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," a powerful metaphor for the abortive nature of war, serves equally well for study:

> From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
> And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
> Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
> I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
> When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

[5] Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir, New Directions, 1960, as quoted by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in Understanding Poetry, 4th ed. (New York, 1976), pp. 71-72.

The poem, composed of three sentences, moves dramatically from somnambulistic sounds in line one, through the awkward sounds of a gunner hunching in an uncomfortable position in line two, through the sounds of his beginning to wake from a dream in line three, to the sudden, harsh, accented sounds of guns in line four--I woke to black flak--before the first four lines come to rest in the words and the nightmare fighters. Between the last two lines, however, the speaker shifts his tone to one of resignation, as if he is standing far off, witnessing his own death. As a result, the last sentence, When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose, shocks the reader with its stark, ironic reflection on the grotesque waste of human life in war, as washed and hose enact the sound of water flushing out the remains of the ball turret gunner.

Students who learn to deal with the material in such poems teach themselves. They may be horrified by Jarrell's poem or disagree with the basic premise behind a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, but if they learn to submit to the form and content of a challenging poem, they reach beyond their own beliefs and begin to set their own standards for art. Hopkins' poem "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" presents such a challenge.

> As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
> As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
> Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
> Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
> Each mortal thing does one thing and the same;
> Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
> Selves--goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
> Crying What I do is me: for that I came.
>
> I say more: the just man justices;
> Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
> Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is--
> Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
> Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
> To the Father through the features of men's faces.

In writing a paper on Hopkins' use of inscape and sprung rhythm, one of my students, Peggy Klein, discovered that this sonnet enacts Hopkins' belief that things reveal their inward shape in their actions. She wrote, "Here in the first part of the poem Hopkins describes the characteristic action of different objects. A kingfisher is a bird which swoops down over the water to catch fish. The bird and the dragonfly in flying catch the sun on their wings. The sound a stone makes as it falls down into a well, the sound of a string on a musical instrument as it is plucked, and the sound the bell makes as its clapper strikes the bowed outside of the bell, these sounds belong to the objects" and give them their names. When she presented her paper to a sophomore writing class, she dwelt on the sounds in the poem, showing other members of the class that the actual sounds in the poem echo the sense. "As tumbled over rim in roundy wells/ Stones ring," makes the sound a stone makes as it falls over the rim into a well, for example, and "each hung bell's/ Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name" creates the rich sound of a sonorous bell ringing. In addition, she pointed out, once the bell imagery is introduced in the poem, the sounds of the bell reverberate throughout the rest of the poem, emphasizing Hopkins' comparison.

In a similar way, students studying the poetry of Emily Dickinson discovered how a slight variation in the meter in one line created a startling sense of loss for the sensitive reader.

The poem, number 510 in Johnson's edition of her poetry, begins in a simple pattern, that of defining something in terms of what it is not:

It was not Death, for I stood up,
And all the Dead, lie down--
It was not Night, for all the Bells
Put out their Tongues, for Noon.

It was not Frost, for on my Flesh
I felt Siroccos--crawl--
Not Fire--for just my Marble feet
Could keep a Chancel, cool--

And yet, it tasted, like them all,
The Figures I have seen
Set orderly, for Burial,
Reminded me, of mine--

As if my life were shaven,
And fitted to a frame,
And could not breathe without a key,
And 'twas like Midnight, some--

When everything that ticked--has stopped--
And Space stares all around--
Or Grisly frosts--first Autumn morns,
Repeal the Beating Ground--

But, most, like Chaos--Stopless--cool--
Without a Chance, or Spar--
Or even a Report of Land--
To justify--Despair.

The meter of this poem, like most of Emily Dickinson's poems, follows the basic pattern of songs from the Calvinist hymnal (It could be sung to "Amazing Grace"), made up of alternating lines of four and three feet. The first line of the fourth stanza, however, breaks the pattern, not only in the number of feet in the line--three and one-half instead of the expected four--but in the context: "As if my life were shaven," shocking the reader with the startling image of a life that is shaven, before the poem moves to its logical conclusion in its sequence of sharp images which describe the elements of despair, the emotion the poem defines.

The more I have worked with the definition of poetry as

a pattern of noise and silence with links between the noises and silences, the more it has proved useful to me, because it does not emphasize poetry as either an intellectual or an emotional pursuit, but both. It implies, too, that the act of reading poetry is not a spectator sport but an active engagement, requiring the whole human being. This definition seems to facilitate the act of breaking and entering a poem to make it a part of our own experience. The following poem by X.J. Kennedy will help show what I mean:

Little Elegy

for a child who skipped rope

Here lies resting, out of breath,
Out of turns, Elizabeth
Whose quicksilver toes not quite
Cleared the whirring edge of night.

Earth whose circles round us skim
Till they catch the lightest limb,
Shelter now Elizabeth
And for her sake trip up Death.

When I have introduced this poem to a class, students, in response to questions, have discovered for themselves that it is based on two conventions: the epitaph and the chant children sing when they skip rope. They have also discovered that the conventions work against one another as the sound reinforces the comparison of the child's death with her resting after she tripped, skipping rope. They have noticed for themselves the change in sounds in the last line to reveal the speaker's hope that death itself will be tripped up.

Such an approach to the teaching of poetry does not rule out a study of words and myth, and a knowledge of prosody; it merely

emphasizes the element of discovery in reading and writing, which, in turn, demands that the reader use every skill at his command to make the poem his own, for language itself is an activity. Elizabeth Sewell, in The Orphic Voice, puts it this way:

> Every word or group of words is at once a meaning, a history, and the occasion of activity in the mind. A word means the mental activity it conjures up, just as much as it means the object to which it refers and all the past uses to which it has been put. This activity is an essential part of language's workings, and it is as much physical as mental, the correlation of perception (which is now recognized as an active and not a passive process of body and mind) with concept. The active participation of the user of the language is part of the nature of language itself. (Sewell, 24)

Her last poem in The Orphic Voice gives form to this concept. This poem is one of a series of working poems she wrote before she wrote each chapter, because, she insists, "the mind knows, in poems, a little more than it knows it knows, so that a poem will often tell the thinking mind where to look next." (Sewell,409)

Genesis

Poet by poet launched upon that sea.
This was before the moon was, or the land.
Everything in a moving patience waited
To be created--

Solitary were they borne
On those immense waters
Breathing and profound
(How many drowned),
The mind, the Mind,
Under this pretence contemplated--

In darkness but for stars
That crowded, jostled, stabbed and showered and rang,
The tideless ocean tingled and pulsated,
A million working surfaces for light,
And by those influences impregnated--

Of World and Mind
Poet by poet said
No thing is only dead
And nothing unrelated. (Sewell, 421)

In summary, the concept that poetry is (as music is) a pattern of noise and silence, with links between the noises and silences, has helped me and my students, like Frost's poet, "move easily in harness" in our study of poetry. This definition, a gift to me from British poet-teacher Barbara Lloyd-Evans, has helped students who have not liked poetry come alive with a sense of discovery. Chena Koponen, for example, who took an Introduction to Poetry class last year because she thought she should learn to like it, came to my office early in the semester, confessed her reason for taking the class and asked if she should drop. I told her to give herself a month. She stayed the semester.

During the last few moments of discussion in our last class of the semester, one student reminded us that Pound had said "Poetry is a centaur." Chena smiled, walked to the board and wrote the following, sharing her elation:

Pound/Frost

Poetry is a centaur
Moving easily in harness.

--Chena Koponen